

Emily Critchley & Eric Langley

[These sonnets are taken from a longer sequence of call-and-response sonnets, exchanged as a dialogue between Emily Critchley and Eric Langley. Each sequence – sometimes comprised of one call and one response, but at other times made up of multiple calls, or multiple responses and further replies – begins as a “reply” or revision of a specific Shakespearean sonnet, and is numbered accordingly.]

IV. ‘Nature’s bequest gives nothing’

CALL:

Selfish – though lovely. You, removing
yourself from circulation, like a Prynne
poem, when the market craves the body
of your works. The words plus the body.
How sore will nature take it when she sees
this loan of hers, utterly squandered, on
no one but you you you. Whilst
your readership, me, wastes in waiting
on a note, a lovely look, a smile.
& it’s not up to you to waste love:
a common gift from our first parents.
When you die no one will look you up
in the book of time, no one will know to
– except me. Better treat me better!

EC

RESPONSE:

Called to all accounts – to take & make them –
I’ll claim my principal exemption:

- a) You see, I’m all about the 0-sum,
the close closed economy – you-4-me –
paid back perhaps with poor low sum-increase,
but much much intense appreciation.
- b) Not quite cool withdrawn from circulation,
but off the common torpid currents, &
out of others’ books, regulatory looks,
the cumulative flux of a cruel excess accreditation.
- c) Does it matter much, this?
- d) The hot demand for
paper kisses, plastic contacts, quickclick digits?

It only only lovely matters: bodies dear, full & frank
outside their eager traffic e our tendered investment.

EL

VI. 'That use is not forbidden'

CALL:

True. Sadness. Pursues. My. Winter.
I long to be that mouth that sings or viol
that plays – distilling spring of music – to be
strained daily, drunk to excess.
A treasured source wch secretly stores up
the past in All. [Sweet.] Happiness.
multiplying sweetness there. From one
to 10 wth such surfeiting. Sweets
beyond sweet. Too hard not to have you
be here after all then.
Or fine. Pursue beyond bound our pleasure
turned pain – for you are too self-willed.
Too full of self. Impossible. Nothing
left but to make my bed amongst dust.

EC

RESPONSE:

Then out of the eater-eaten comes out
sweet AND sweetly, AND sweet still-sweeter still –
bees AND worms AND breeding – head to head AND
bound by bitter egg-white albumin, AND
squeezed to the hatching, squeezed "to the power of".

Each worm produces 3 cocoons per week.

About 3 worms then emerge

AND sweetly
quick to full maturity AND breeding.
Sordid earthgains AND offspring off from friends:
worms beyond worms AND all so interested.
Just. Some. Kinda. Usury. Going. Down.
Just how it always went, out in the dust.
It's selfish economics up for lovely gain:
let's make worms' meat – *sweet sweet* – beyond the bitter end.

EL

XXIII. 'O! learn to read what silent love...'

CALL:

Hear the blue penumbra black of my heart;
see the sugared salty sounds of wanting.

See as no words come but ████████ heard;
██████ wet-typed ████████ on tacky ribbons.

These ecstatic stasies, only legible to
some MobRat synesthete, KoobFace coder,
some touch translator, reading th' hot press,
alive to the impress, live to contact,
o! alert to long a long decryption:
filling out hungryhungry blanks; going
o deft i'the gasps – ████████ – spoken
– ████████ – ineloquent silence & more
than tongues; ████████ E, in absence.
Put out beside itself, each erred-word says

it wants you

EL

RESPONSE:

I fear to trust – I will not say how
true or untrue – but like a bud bit
by a worm, too soon! such blanks & secret
sounds so far from absence would *I fear*
force discovery if but put
to tongues wagging, lips sealing where you
set your press, yr most impressive mail.

These ecstatic gaps these silences
won't wring, dear E, a word from me, or grasp
after the last gasp for more when you are
pressed apart (not one, but two). So lovely
looks of love, & sugared-over breast,
unperfect actor-ing, you plead dumbly.

Tho set your pen at rest,

E wants you too.

EC

XXIX. 'Haply I think on thee...'

CALL:

Content can't take this constant tension, E.
I'm strung so out that every eyelet yawns,
and This man,
This,
This man he, all attent
and so attentive to the every tug
tug expectant: it's not that I'm ignored,
but, E, kinaesthetised, kinaesthetised
cute to the current, woof to the webwork.
Not in disgrace, not all alone, not so
bootless. Yet discontent, extenuous out out to
each'n'every other. & yet not you.
& I think of you and and it does seem
and & it does seem to hymn such wealth brings
charged by

kings arising

terr if ic al ly dis con tent ed, haply haply E.

EL

RESPONSE:

Within the scope of my eye line you seem
outside my scope of choice, within the book
and volume of my pretty brain, *unmixed*
with baser matter, still here fairly
waiting, lies a part, my fair according
voice, & waiting

waiting waiting waiting

waiting, all alone & will. Yet
& does need you. Yet not so
discontent, no. I no longer
strive to strive toward such lengths, but
aesthetised aesthetised O.

Tho I do think of you wishing me
like, & it does seem disgrace-
fully, risibly content to do so.

EC

L. 'How heavy do I journey on the way...'

CALL:

Such lengthy lag in transit, dragged out from
complex transfer, held with such suspicious
stuff hugged among my plasti-rapt language:
shots of true dopamine; sharp metallic
memories of ev'ry hazardous hit.
And yes, others did interfere with my
mulish baggage, riffling every suit in
every softlocked case. High fees for awesome excess,
snagged by unseen add-ons. And I'm all pulled-
up by customs, gone strip-lit to my gate.
Every mile & I'm such an over-wrought metaphor
in tenuous measures of nicest plod.

& thus & far for miles, & measure-up –
fine & final-called - E, & behind me, joy

EL

RESPONSE:

Miles from me, E, I do not love
it where
without some word you are not
bearing the loss
of me not heavy handed with fear
not plucking
from me
the heart
not fretting to make me fret.

In sharpest terms, how can I sound the words
to make it stop that would be stopped by you?

Instead you trip your weekends & I'm left
behind. You & your love. As is
the custom. Leaving me nothing ahead
nor to look forward to, nor
to have nor hold from this day. Nothing
excessive, nothing to pay. Nothing
neither here nor there. Only these lines:
lengths I go too far to keep near.

EC

CXXX. 'My mistress' eyes'

CALL:

And now you're laced-up, love, in this serous membrane:
my word to yr matter; fascia to yr form.
Comparison comes as softest simile-wad,
metaphor as fibroblast, deep down the dermis,
in cadent lines of hot connective collagen.
I've got twelve descriptive digits twined to yr scalp,
hushed by yr coral lips, hush'd by yr sunlit eyes.

O, as areolar, & as adipose, E!

No-thing fu-cking like. & not that it matters-much;
it's all just Odious Stuff. Take yr transverse arch,
instep down, & grind to a truly trodden ground:
love tucks-up the talus, & I'm hard to yr heel,
locked against yr anklebone, turned on the tender-
keystone; and when you write - *E* - plant yr plenum down.

EL

RESPONSE:

You've got me not sleeping with your serous
metre, yre not meeting my present
matter, silent scattered strophes. Why
your fibers are so far apart frm here
there is ample space to amble (with a
single instep stuffed). All that inter-
stitial fluid, wanton wanting blood.
I would have new uptake on these new(s)
nutrients. But epithelial
the epithet, proto-
zoic, the prologue,
without consequence the cadence. If only
you would sit still & write kind.

Or be truly hard at my heels,
sensing sense, bound beyond bound.

EC

REPLY I OF II:

My mistress' eyes – *just like* – are G-Dwarf Stars,
are perfect-plasma, solar-dynamos,
pulling *just like* magnets, *just like & like*,
like Maxwell said in 1855
[“On Faraday’s Lines O *Lines* of Force”]
& Ohm, of voltage & intensity:
if only E were just like E.
Yr eyes
clean burn through my blindside bluesky scatt’ring,
yr every yellowlook, whitehot hooks, are
Class-V luminous & fusingfusing.
You’ve got me too, brightbound beyond boundaries,
locked in yr convective hydrogen-heart.
But I can’t meet this, meekly. Or do this, kindly.
Can’t quite admit this sense or snag, snag to yr simile

EL

REPLY II OF II:

If only I would sit & sit still,
& kindly kindly turn. But my each eye burns,
burns’n’burns among the phototoxins.
As one kind-glance, that looked to like,
– *like the sun, like coral, snow like rosebuds* –
scorched spots of solar retinopathy.

My sight was dim, an heure decay’d, vanish’d.

I can’t write can’t read but shut myself up
dark-for-days diverting hot-hot sunspots.

*There appeared a company of crows, crows
together in the air. At first I did
believe I saw a company of crows, flying
in air. What is happ’ning to me (& to my eyes)?*

Yr eyes, in some-some sense, are something-like some-sun.

EL

Emily Critchley is the author of *Ten Thousand Things* (UEA: Boiler House Press) and a selected writing: *Love / All That / & OK* (London: Penned in the Margins). She is also editor of *Out of Everywhere 2: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK* (Reality Street, 2016). Critchley is Senior Lecturer in English and Creative Writing at the University of Greenwich, London

Eric Langley works as a lecturer at UCL, publishing academic writing on Shakespeare and period conceptions of interiority: his first monograph *Narcissism And Suicide in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* was published by Oxford University Press in 2009, and his second - *Shakespeare’s Contagious Sympathies: III Communications* - is coming out later this year. His first poetry collection, *Raking Light*, was published by Carcanet in 2017 and was shortlisted for the Felix Dennis Prize for Best First Collection at that year’s Forward Prizes. A pamphlet of sonnets, written in dialogue with Emily Critchley, is forthcoming from Crater Press